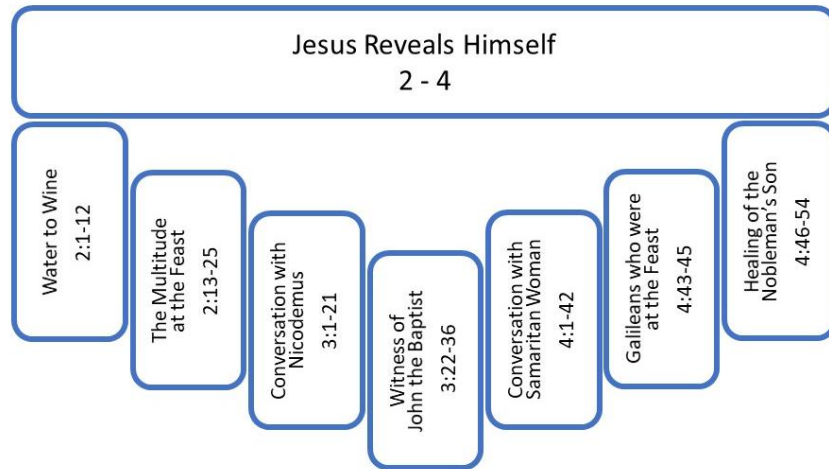


Lesson 5: John 3.1-21 Conversation with Nicodemus

Introduction



“Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night...”

What a great start to a story. He is a man of the Pharisees. This is the most prominent spiritual and moral movement among the Jews of Jesus’ day. They believed in afterlife. They believed in the importance of keeping the whole of the law. They were not Christmas and Easter believers. They were saying their prayers every day, giving to the poor, fasting and arguing about issues ranging from predestination to what constitutes lust of the eyes. This man belonged to this serious, religious group committed to the Scripture. He was a Pharisee.

We also get his name, Nicodemus. That makes you wonder if maybe he was known. Maybe he was prominent among the Jews or became prominent in later Jewish or Christian circles. It was a rare name for Jews, but we do have records of it appearing in the powerful and wealthy Gurion family. He is a somebody. He is described as a ruler, suggesting that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the 71-member ruling council of Jerusalem, consisting both of priests and non-priestly aristocrats.

In verse 10, Jesus calls Nicodemus a teacher, which is not true of all aristocratic Pharisees. They were not all teachers. Nicodemus represents the most elite religious class of the day. He has the best training. He is from a good family. He has power as a ruler and influence as a teacher. This is the man who came to Jesus at night.

Let’s read the story in two parts. First let’s read the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus in 3:1-15 and address that conversation. Then we will look at the commentary that continues in 3:16-21. In both of these passages, we are keeping our two major themes in mind, the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith. What additional insights are revealed here, concerning who Jesus is and how a person comes to that faith which results in eternal life? We start with John 3:1-15.

Dialogue

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”

“At Night”

“At night” is the kind of detail in John that you pass over at first as simple, literary context. The man came at night. That’s when he happened to come. Dinner parties happen at night. The reference just helps describe the scene. That is one valid interpretation. But then the text is going to end with reference to light and dark, a recurring theme in this Gospel. And later on in the Gospel, we are going to read of a particular person going out into the night. So, we come back to this reference and wonder is there more to the night than simply the time of day. Some see here reluctance on Nicodemus’ part to be seen openly with Jesus. Maybe he is afraid for his own reputation. Maybe he is not afraid, maybe he does not want people to misinterpret his interest as an endorsement of this Rabbi Jesus. Influential people have to take care when they meet with known personalities. Nicodemus doesn’t know yet if he wants Jesus in his camp or if he wants to be in Jesus’ camp. I think “night” here does suggest a reluctance to be seen openly with Jesus. Nicodemus is not identifying as an open believer. But I think “night” in this context speaks even more to Nicodemus’ spiritual state.

The previous story described for us many Israelites at the feast of the Passover believing in the name of Jesus. And yet, the nature of that belief motivated Jesus to hold himself back from those believers. He did not entrust himself to them. And so, we wonder what it really meant to say that they trusted in him. What did they believe about Jesus? What was the nature of their faith, if Jesus needed to hold himself back from them?

Immediately after that account, with Jesus still in Judea, we get this story of one of the rulers, coming to Jesus at night who claims to come in response to signs Jesus did. Signs were in that last story. Nicodemus brings them up here. In that last story Jewish rulers questioned Jesus’ zeal in the temple, requiring of him a sign to prove his authority to act the way he did. Jesus pushed them back, suggesting a sign they would never agree to try, “tear down the temple.” And then Jesus went on to do many signs. As a result of which many believed, even if inadequately. So, how about this Nicodemus? What is his connection to those events? Was he one of the rulers who required a sign of Jesus and was then later surprised at the many signs Jesus did? Did he himself believe in some sense with an inadequate faith like many others?

He does not seem to be one of those. He acknowledges the signs Jesus did as saying something about Jesus. But he is no Nathanael crying out, “Son of God, King of Israel!” We are not encouraged yet to think of Nicodemus as one of those who believed. And we are going to be discouraged by his lack of insight. He comes at night, suggesting the state of his soul, the extent of his insight. He is in the dark. But he does have this one thing going for him. And it is a very important thing. He came to the light. He came at night. His mind and heart were still wrapped up in the darkness. But he did come. He did knock. He is asking. And we might say that in some way Jesus is going to entrust himself to Nicodemus. If not completely, still, to a considerably more degree than he did to the many who professed belief at the Passover.

“Signs”

So, when he enters, Nicodemus states a truth about the signs. If Jesus did indeed do the miracles credited to him, then those miracles point to God. Nicodemus sees two truths in the signs. First, God is with Jesus. “No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Second, Jesus’ teaching is validated. “We know you have come from God as a teacher.”

Jesus now puts those assertions to the test and begins to teach. How much does Nicodemus believe what he has just said about Jesus. “You say, I am a teacher, consider this, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” And Nicodemus does not bring up this topic. Jesus does. And part of the statement would have been very familiar to Nicodemus; another part quite foreign. Who gets into the kingdom of God was a common theme of religious debate. In fact, if Jesus had just asked, “Who do you think gets into the kingdom of God?” Nicodemus would have felt quite comfortable with that conversation. There was no debate about the basic answer. Everybody knew the basic answer. The righteous person gets into the kingdom of God. That’s who gets into the kingdom of God. You get in by being righteous. The debate, even among Pharisees, was “How righteous do you have to be?”

Though if our culture does not use the term righteous, pretty much everybody who believes in God and an afterlife understands the discussion of criteria. Who does God let into heaven? And there are those in culture who reject God and heaven all together. But Jesus is talking to a very religious person at the moment, so let’s just consider the religious people in society. Who is righteous enough to get in? I think for me, living in a culture like Croatia where religion and nationality are connected helps me understand the potential Jewish answers to the question. There are some in Croatia who feel like being Croatian is good enough. You are automatically Catholic if you are Croatian, so as long as you are marginally Roman Catholic, your Croatian identity gets you into the kingdom of heaven. Don’t over think it. Most sincere Catholics would argue there has to be more than that. You need to at least observe the sacraments. You need to be baptized and you need to confess your sins and you need to take mass once or twice a year and you need to be married and buried as a Catholic. Nobody can be perfect. You do not need to be, as long as you keep the most significant rituals, then you are okay. But then you have more serious Catholics who would argue that some standard of moral behavior must be achieved. You do not get in just because you are a Catholic Croat by birth. And while the sacraments are important, they are not enough. You also have to care enough to try and walk with God and live a life honoring to God. This are the ones who are going to wait for marriage to have sex, or something like that. They are morally serious.

The reality in every religious culture is that you have a continuum of thinking on this question of how good is good enough, whether we are talking about Protestants in North Carolina or Orthodox in Ukraine or Muslims in Iran, there are those who believe that being born into a certain situation is basically good enough, others who would argue for at least some basic religious ritual as necessary, and still others who would push for a higher degree of moral accomplishment. Everybody seems to believe that some combination of faith plus ritual plus moral works provides entrance into eternal life. And they just push it backward and forward along the continuum. Somewhere in there is the answer to this question.

This is a normal debate for the topic of the kingdom of God. Who is righteous enough to get in? And Nicodemus would have been comfortable discussing this. Are all Jews included among the righteous, having been born into the people of God? Or must you also keep the covenant markers of Sabbath rest and food laws and circumcision to be counted among the righteous? Or must you go further, also applying yourself to moral obedience? How much is enough to be counted righteous? Who really gets into the kingdom? And as a Pharisee, Nicodemus is going to be on the further side. He is going to require being a Jew, he is going to require keeping the covenant markers, and he is going to require moral obedience.

Without getting too much into the kingdom of God idea right now, we can observe that John states his concern through his Gospel in terms of eternal life. He does not really talk about the kingdom. He only quotes Jesus referring to the kingdom of God twice in this Gospel, once in this passage with the Jewish ruler Nicodemus and once much later talking to the Roman Governor Pilate. With everybody else the discussion is about eternal life. And that would not throw Nicodemus off track. As a Pharisee he believed in the resurrection, so he understands the idea both of a kingdom of David on earth but then also of an eternal kingdom that will last forever.

What threw Nicodemus off balance was Jesus' statement regarding who gets in.

"Born again"

³ Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

What is that? The "born again" get into the kingdom of God. Nicodemus, is like, "I have no idea what you are talking about Jesus." The "born again" language does not have a parallel in the Old Testament for Nicodemus to draw from. That does not mean he does not have any Old Testament background that might be helpful. Moses had taught in Deuteronomy that God would do a new spiritual work in his people, circumcising their hearts so that they might be able to love him with heart and soul (Deuteronomy 30:6). And Jeremiah indicates that under the new covenant God would write his law on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Ezekiel prophesied that God would put a new heart and a new spirit within, removing the heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:36).

So, it is understandable that Nicodemus would be thrown off by the birth language, but it is also interesting that he is not about to catch up with Jesus. He is not able to follow Jesus through the dialogue and understand that they are talking about internal spiritual change. He has become so used to religion as doctrine and ritual and morality that he has no ability to grasp hold of Jesus' metaphor for spiritual regeneration.

We do not have to take Nicodemus as being so dull that he really believed Jesus spoke about being physically born again by the same mother. Nicodemus is most likely just pointing out the absurdity in what Jesus has said, not because he thinks Jesus is seriously suggesting that, but to indicate that it makes no sense. This makes no sense that you would crawl up into your mother's womb and be born again.

Jesus makes a slight change the second time he asserts the necessity of new birth. The first time he says that a person cannot "see the kingdom of God" unless born again. The second time he says a person cannot "enter the kingdom of God" unless born again. I believe the change is significant. To this point in the Gospel, seeing has been related to knowing and understanding. By the light of Christ, we see truth. If that emphasis is consistent here, Jesus is implying that a person cannot understand or know, cannot see, the true nature of the kingdom of God without being born again. New birth is necessary to see. And point number two is that new birth is necessary for entry. And that's not something Nicodemus has ever heard before in his discussions about who gets into the kingdom. The "born again" get in. What does that mean?

"Born of water and the spirit"

Now Jesus' clarification that one must be born of water and the spirit has resulted in a lot of debate about the necessity of baptism for salvation. I don't know if you have heard that before. The assumption has been made that being born of water is baptism and being born of the Spirit is the internal work of regeneration done by the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is in the immediate context at the end of chapter 3 where we are told both John and Jesus are baptizing. So, it is not out of the realm of possibility to be thinking about baptism here in John 3. Does the water here refer to baptism? And if it does, does it refer to the baptism of repentance performed by John or to baptism in the name of Jesus that we see after the birth of the Church? Those are two valid options. And to support the two options we can look back to 1:33 and the Baptist's comment that he was sent to baptize in water whereas Jesus would baptize in the Holy Spirit. And that is an interesting parallel here. That if John the Baptist baptizes in water and Jesus in the Holy Spirit, and you must be baptized by water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God, then is baptism necessary to enter the kingdom of God?

But is the problem, because the witness of the New Testament Scripture is decisively against the idea that water baptism is necessary to be born again or to enter into eternal life. At one point, frustrated by the divisiveness of the Corinthians, Paul declares, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:17)." That's an interesting claim if baptism is a necessary element of salvation, but Paul is saying, "I didn't come to baptize. I came to preach the gospel." And here in the Gospel of John, John uses the language of birth in the prologue, writing, "But as many as received Him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (1:12-13)." In those two verses John sets up a parallel in which becoming children of God and being born of God are the same thing and receiving Jesus and believing in Jesus are the same thing. For John, the crucial issue is true belief in Jesus. That is how you are born again. Baptism is not mentioned in the prologue. And if we go to the end of the Gospel to the purpose statement in 20:30-31, we get the same emphasis. John tells us that these signs have been described, so we might believe in Jesus and have life in his name. There is no reference to baptism. In fact, there hasn't been since the end of chapter 3, the first verse of chapter 4. John does not consider baptism a necessary requirement for eternal life. Belief yes, baptism, no.

So, what is baptism doing here as a requirement for new birth? Well, is it baptism here? Is being born of water a reference to baptism? A different perspective is to understand the birth of water as physical birth and the birth of the Spirit as regeneration by the Holy Spirit. That interpretation emphasizes the two required births for life. First, we must be born physically as though by water. But that is not enough. We must also be born spiritually by the Spirit. If this is the right interpretation for water and spirit then verse 6 builds on this way in this way, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Two births are in mind, one of water or flesh and one of the Spirit.

That interpretation is consistent with New Testament doctrine, and I like it, though, I favor yet another interpretation. D. A. Carson emphasizes three factors that indicate Jesus had only one birth in mind here, not two.¹

First, when we notice the parallelism of Jesus' two statements, we see that one birth is in view.

You need to look in your Bible to see this.

³ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

⁵ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

Verse 3 and verse 5 begin the same way, "Truly, truly, I say to you..." Verses 3 and 5 also end the same way, except in the change of the word "see" to "enter", "...he cannot see [or enter] the kingdom of God."

¹ D. A. Carson. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel according to John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991) 194.

And then the middle of each verse states the necessary condition for seeing the kingdom of God or entering the kingdom of God. In verse three it is, “unless one is born again.” And in verse 5 it is, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit.” So, “unless one is born again” is parallel to “unless one is born of water and the spirit.” So the most natural way to take these to statements is to recognize that being born of water and the Spirit in verse 5 is the same thing as being born again in verse 3. It is spiritual birth.

A second point has to do with the grammar. The preposition “of” in verse 5 controls both water and Spirit as one unit. We are not born “of water” and then born “of the Spirit.” There is just one “of” here. We are born “of water and the Spirit.” That suggests that Jesus had one birth in mind and that one birth came both from water and the Spirit.

A third point can be made from regular Old Testament use of water as symbolic for the Spirit. That suggests a conceptual base for the interpretation of water here in a context that Nicodemus could have been expected to understand. If Jesus is referring water and spirit in an Old Testament sense, it gives Nicodemus a chance to follow because of all of his Old Testament knowledge. The best Old Testament example is probably Ezekiel 36:25-27.

²⁵ “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

The sprinkling of water in this passage is not a rite that must happen before God puts his Spirit into his people. The sprinkling of water in this passage is symbolic of the spiritual reality. It is the same thing as putting his Spirit into his people. Similar language is also used by Paul in the New Testament in Titus 3:5-7.

⁵ He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life.

In this passage, though the word water is not used, the ideas of being washed and being poured out invoke the idea of water that are applied directly to the Holy Spirit. We are washed by the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is poured out. We could say that Jesus’ use of water here in John 3:5 operates with a similar purpose as that of the more developed ritual of baptism that later comes into play in the New Covenant. Water is a symbol of spiritual cleansing and regeneration which is accomplished by the Holy Spirit in the soul of a person. Baptism is going to be ritualized in the New Covenant as a symbolic indication of that spiritual inward reality. So, to say that one must be born of water and the Spirit here is simply to say that one must be regenerated by the Holy Spirit. That is the interpretation I favor.

“Do not marvel”

Jesus goes on to tell Nicodemus not to be so surprised that people must be born again, comparing spiritual reality to the wind. It is a very nice, simple illustration that says so much about the reality of true faith. I remember using this when my girls were really, really little. And just abstract concepts didn’t make any sense to talk about God. They knew the wind. And they could feel the wind. And just to say, “You know how you can’t see the wind. That is like God. You can’t see God. But you know he is there.” True belief is a spiritual reality. This is one of the reasons it is so challenging for us to know whether someone has true belief or not. The wind blows. You know it is there. But you cannot see the source. You don’t really know where it is, where it is going. God is at work in the souls of men and women. There is a reality of the spirit going on that we cannot see. This is where the work of God is taking place, where it must take place.

“The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus has not understood what Jesus is talking about. Being righteous is about being a Jew, performing Jewish ritual, doing good moral works. This talk of being born of the Spirit as the criteria for entering the kingdom of God does not fit. “How can it be that spiritual birth satisfies the requirement of righteousness? How can it be that a person is born of the Spirit?” And that’s his question. “How can it be?” Nicodemus claims to be a teacher and yet, does not understand. And Jesus calls him out for that.

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.”

It is not easy to know exactly what distinction Jesus is making between earthly and heavenly things. It sounds like the subject they have been talked about is considered earthly things to Jesus. But they have been talking about spiritual birth. Still, I think that is the right view. Earthly here does not necessarily mean fleshly or material, but that which happens on earth, that which human beings can understand. A teacher of Israel ought to have insight into the spiritual realities of the human heart. Heavenly things more rightly have to do with the divine nature of Jesus or the future, eternal kingdom of God, things that have not been revealed in the word of God, that can only be known if you have been to heaven and seen them.

And for his part, Jesus is able to reveal heavenly truth to Nicodemus, things that he has never heard of before. And that agrees with the assertion in the prologue that Jesus, being God and being with God, is able to uniquely reveal God. Jesus can reveal as yet unrevealed truth about heavenly things, but if Nicodemus has not been able to understand the conversation so far, he is not going to be yet ready to receive more.

Nevertheless, Jesus goes on to reveal more to Nicodemus, just a little bit more. Jesus chooses to entrust a bit more of himself, a bit of the heavenly things, even though Nicodemus cannot yet see what Jesus is talking about. Jesus says in verses 14-15,

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;
¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

The reference may be obtuse to modern readers. It would have been clear to Nicodemus. He would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about. It makes me think of Captain America and the reference to flying monkeys in Avengers, which shows I come from a Marvel family. Captain America became famous fighting Nazis in World War II. But he is frozen in ice, and he misses 70 years worth of culture. So, through the whole Avengers movie, references keep flying over his head until Nick Fury makes a comment about flying monkeys. And Cap goes, “I get that reference! I get it!” And he would get that reference. It is from the Wizard of Oz which came out in 1939. That is his time period. So, he is pretty excited to finally get something. And that’s just how I imagine Nicodemus here. He does not know what Jesus is talking about. And then Jesus throws out a comment about the bronze serpent. And he is probably thinking, “I get that reference! I know what we are talking about.”

And even if we don’t get it, he would have known so well the story from Numbers 21, where after forty years wandering in the desert, the first generation of Israelites out of Egypt, grumbles for the 1000th time, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loath this miserable food.” That’s not true. They have got food and water. When necessary God provides it miraculously. God has cared for them the whole way. They are getting mana from heaven. There is food. They just don’t like it. They call God’s food, “miserable

food,” revealing the hardness of their heart that lacks faith, lacks gratitude, and refuses to take responsibility for their own sin which got them stuck in the wilderness.

As an act of judgement, that also had the purpose of shaking them back to repentance, God sent poisonous snakes into the camp. And people were dying from the poisonous bites. After initiating his wrath, God also provided a way out. He told Moses, “fix a bronze serpent on a pole,” with the instruction that anyone bitten should look at the bronze serpent and so, will live.

Nicodemus would have gotten that reference to Numbers right away. But apparently that is all he got. He falls out of the conversation at this point. And we are to assume that he did not get the comparison Jesus made to himself.

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;

¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

To be lifted up is most naturally taken as to be exalted. A king is lifted up in praise. His glory is announced. The phrase “lifted up” will be used three times in John. It is really the irony of John. Right away, we see that something is wrong. Lifted up is the language of glory for a king. But here the Son of Man is compared to the serpent in the wilderness. Nicodemus could not have known what this meant. But we know. As the serpent was lifted up on a pole, Jesus is going to be lifted up on a cross.

We are driven then to ask, “What is the nature of the parallel? How is Jesus like the serpent?” We could say, “Jesus died for us on a cross.” Well, yes he did. But the serpent didn’t die for them on the pole. The serpent is not a symbol of atonement. If it had been a sheep or a goat, we might see that connection. But no snake ever died in anyone’s place. That is not what we are supposed to see.

So, we return to consider the original story. The serpent is the curse, the consequence of sin, the expression of God’s wrath. The right punishment was hung on a pole. The snake was put on a pole. And if anyone would looked to that pole, they would be granted life.

This is one aspect of the cross. What do we deserve for our sin? What is the consequence, the right expression of God’s wrath? What is the curse? “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” “And the wages of sin is death.” I deserve to die for my sin. So, what do I see when I look at the cross? I see a man put to death. I see the curse. I deserve the snake. I deserve death. And if in faith we say, “That should be me. That is the just punishment I deserve,” then we will live.

Nicodemus asked, concerning new birth and entry into the kingdom of God, “How can these things be?” These things can be because the King has come to earth to be lifted up on a cross. He has come to take the cure that we deserve, so that by looking to him, we might live.

With Nicodemus out of the story, now we go on to the second part of our passage. This is the further commentary in 3:16-21.

Commentary

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”

Notice the contrasts set up through this paragraph. Death and life. Condemnation and Salvation. Light and Darkness. Let’s consider all three.

Death and Life

John 3:16 is one of the most famous Bible verses there is. We all know it, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” It is a beautiful one sentence summary of the gospel. We probably have not often thought about it in comparison to the bronze serpent story which is the lead into the proclamation of John 3:16. Recognizing that context helps us to see the tension here between the wrath that comes from God and the salvation that comes from God.

The Israelites deserved the just punishment of death. But God gave them a way out. Why? “For God so loved the world.” He is motivated by his love. In the case of the serpent, we are talking about physical life and death. Here, we are talking about eternal life and death. We are talking about being left out of the kingdom of God forever. The perishing here is not just physical death, it is eternal death. The result of belief in the Son is eternal life. And that is our first contrast. The contrast between eternal life and eternal perishing.

Judgment and Salvation

Verse 17 moves on to set up the contrast between judgment and salvation. “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” This is where modern culture stops with this verse. And ends up usually getting it wrong. The context of the bronze serpent reminds us that judgment has already been pronounced. The Israelites had sinned. God pronounced judgement. The wrath, the assurance of perishing, came from God. God is the one who sent the snakes. Who does Jesus come to save us from? Well, from God. We could also say from ourselves. We are the ones who have sinned bringing the penalty upon ourselves. But then God is the just judge who is going to demand the penalty be paid. We need salvation from the right justice of God. God provided the Israelites the bronze serpent, so that they might be saved from his wrath. The Son of Man will be lifted up for the same reason. That we might be saved from God’s wrath. We do not need to wait for death for a sentence of judgment. Judgement day is not when scales will be weighed. The scales are already weighed. We already fall short. Judgement day is the day of execution. But the pronouncement has already been made.

And verse 17 should not be used to set Jesus up in contrast to God’s just judgement. It is not true that the Father judges and the Son does not judge. All judgment has been given into the hands of the Son. He reigns as King. He pronounces judgement. The reason Jesus does not come into the world to judge is not because Jesus does not judge but because Jesus has already judged. He does not need to come into the world to do that. Why would he come into the world to judge? We are already under judgment. And this is what we read in verse 18. “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” What we need is salvation from the just wrath of God. That is why Jesus came into the world. He came to take our judgment upon himself. And this is the second contrast, the contrast between the judgment of God and the salvation of God.

Just as the judgment is motivated by the good justice of God, the salvation is motivated by the love of God. “For God so loved the world.” And the way we receive that salvation is through believing in Him. If we do not believe in him, we cannot be saved from the judgement that has already been pronounced. We are on death row. God has made an offer. Look to the Son who has been lifted up on a cross in your place. He has already paid your penalty. Look to him and trust in him and your judgement will be removed. His death will be counted as your payment.

Light and Darkness

Now, why would a person not accept that offer? Part of the answer comes with the third contrast, the contrast between light and dark.

¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices

the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”

One problem that prevents us from coming to faith in Jesus, is our lack of spiritual insight. That is not the problem we just read. This is the problem we have seen already in Nicodemus. His coming to Jesus seems to suggest that he wants to know truth about Jesus. But even with all his religious training and experience, he cannot understand the necessity of spiritual regeneration and he cannot fathom how it might be accomplished. Now, I said “even with all his religious training and experience” whereas I probably should have said, “in part because of all his religious training and experience.” The wheels of his mind are so deeply fixed in the rut of a very well worn path, such that he is not able to follow the lead of Jesus when Jesus calls him onto a new path. The problem is not with the allusions Jesus has made. It is not too abstract for Nicodemus. In our next chapter an uneducated, Samaritan woman is going to start by being confused by an illusion to living water, but she will be able to follow where Jesus leads her. She is going grasp the essential truths that this very committed religious priest is not able to follow.

With Nicodemus we see a dullness of spiritual sight.

But the contrast here at the end, this is a slightly different contrast. It is a more fundamental problem. The main reason human beings cannot see the what the light reveals is that human beings do not want to see what the light reveals. The fundamental problem is moral. Jesus may be good and true, but we do not want the good and true. We will take it a bit but not when it contrasts our deeper, darker needs, not when it contrasts the false visions of ourselves we have created. We don't want that good and true. We can take a bit of Jesus as long as we filter him through our own prism of seeing the world. The world loves Jesus who never judges, who comes to save and validates everybody in their own desires and their own definition of themselves. You are good. And you are good. And you are good. You're all good. Jesus would never judge anybody. That Jesus does not body anybody. They will welcome that Jesus.

But that is not the light of Jesus. That is putting a heavy blanket over the window to make sure Jesus does not get through.

When the light of Jesus reveals some of our favorite desires as cruel and selfish and vain, prideful, ugly, we do not welcome that. We want to shut it out. We want to push Jesus back, shut it down. Who are you Jesus to suggest there is anything deeply wrong with me and my desires? Who are you to claim that what you see is true in me?

It is like waking up from pitch black sleep to a piercing light because mom reached in and turned on the light. If we had a long stick, we'd whack the lightbulb. It is good we don't. Instead, we roll under our blanket with the pillow over our head. The light hurts the eyes and we long to be back in the darkness.

The light of Jesus reveals our moral works for what they are, our sense of justice for what it really is, our sense of goodness, our sexual desire, our lusts, our greed, our vain identity. You can imagine how the authorities in Jerusalem felt after Jesus cleared out the temple. “Who are you to come in here, young man, and suggest you are more zealous for God than we are? Who are you? You are from Galilee. What are you doing?” He upstaged them. And they claimed to be the most good. But they had allowed God's temple to fall into such a state. They knew he was right. But they did not admit it. They did not say, “He is right. We should have done better. Thank you Jesus for that rebuke.” Not at all. “Who is he to disrupt the temple of God! Whipping those poor animals. What kind of person is he? Causing such a disruption, so much noise during a holy week. The Romans are going to get upset. People can't worship. What is he doing? He wants to draw attention to himself. It is just all about him.” I don't know, of course, what they really said. But they did not like Jesus shining a light and so, they turned towards their darkness, and they call it light.

And if Jesus keeps shining light into their deeds and their identity, you can bet that they will seek a way to extinguish the light all together.

We finish this passage here wondering what happened to Nicodemus. Did he hide in the dark or did he come to the light? At the beginning, it seemed a little of both. But we are going to have to wait with Nicodemus. We don't get an answer right now at what happens to Nicodemus, what is going on in his heart. We are going to have to wait to see if he comes back in the story later.

Let's sum up with three principles of faith that stand out in this dialogue.

1. One, content matters in faith. Saving faith is faith in Jesus and not in the Jesus we might want, but in the Jesus who is. The bronze serpent parallel to the Son of Man being lifted up adds some to our content. We see in verse 18 a switch from Son of Man to Son of God, so the content of faith includes recognizing the divinity of Jesus. It also includes recognizing that Jesus has died to take the curse we deserve. That is going to be a fundamental aspect of belief in Jesus.
2. Spiritual reality matters in faith. Faith is not simply an act of the intellect or even an act of the will. It is those things. But it seems that Jesus has suggested here that some spiritual work must happen in us, not only before we enter the kingdom of God, but before we can see the kingdom of God. Spiritual truth is seen with spiritual eyes. Eyes that a serious, trained, religious Jew like Nicodemus did not have. He could only barely see that Jesus must be from God because of the signs he did. He could not see much further than that.
3. Human nature resists faith in Jesus. We learn here that our biggest problem is moral. Deep in the soul, deep in our natural state, human beings do not want to entrust themselves to Jesus, at least not to the true Jesus as he reveals himself to be.

Reflection questions

1. Read John 3:1-21. Read this conversation with Nicodemus as though for the first time. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing?
2. What do you think Nicodemus understood and what did Nicodemus not understand? Try to be specific.
3. What is your general impression of the priesthood? Do you tend towards a more negative or a more positive view of priests? Can you relate to how Nicodemus' training, experience, and position hinder his ability to understand Jesus? Does that make sense to you or is it surprising to you?
4. How would you describe the parallel between the bronze serpent and the son of man?
5. How does that parallel help you to understand 3:16-22?
6. Which contrast stands out to you the most in 3:16-22? Life and death; salvation and judgment; light and darkness? Why?
7. Which of the three summary statements stands out as most significant for you at this time in your life? Why?
8. Would you describe yourself as born again? When would you say you were born again? What is some way that your life has changed from the time when you were not born again to now?